

VZCZCXYZ0001
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUL #0934/01 0890626
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 300626Z MAR 07
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3643
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2255
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2363
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 7924
RHMFIASS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR
RHMFIASS/COMUSKOREA J2 SEOUL KOR
RHMFIASS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC//OSD/ISA/EAP//

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000934

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/05/2017

TAGS: KN KS PREL

SUBJECT: UK EMBASSY PYONGYANG PERSPECTIVE: CHANCE MEETINGS
ARE MOST USEFUL

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Richard Vowles, DCM at the British Embassy in Pyongyang, told a group of diplomats at a March 28 dinner in Seoul that his Embassy operates largely in an information-free "bubble" in Pyongyang, gaining little from frequent meetings with MFA officials. The four UK officers have almost complete freedom to move around Pyongyang, however, and occasionally strike up interesting conversations with businessmen, while most ordinary people avoid contact. He verified that posters praising the nuclear weapon test have been removed, and said DPRK officials consistently voice support for the Six-Party Talks. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Asked for a "day in the life" at the UK Embassy in Pyongyang, Vowles said that the four UK officers assigned to Pyongyang were keenly aware of being in an information-free "bubble," so they spend one or two hours each morning reading news and other information received by e-mail. Most days, Vowles seeks meetings with MFA or Trade Ministry officials, but can only see officials assigned to cover Europe and usually gains little insight. DPRK government offices are neither heated nor cooled; some officials wear layers of long underwear in winter. Recently, officials have stressed DPRK support for the Six Party Talks. Trade Ministry officials talk enthusiastically about attracting joint ventures, but to little apparent effect. Some have provided what appear to be shared e-mail addresses, but e-mails tend to go unanswered so telephone communication is better.

¶3. (C) UK officials regularly meet other diplomats -- a community of about 60 people -- and find Chinese and Russian colleagues most knowledgeable. The Chinese Ambassador to the DPRK recently reported with enthusiasm that Kim Jong-il appeared very healthy and well briefed when he visited the Chinese Embassy in February. UK officials try to find reasons to visit EU-supported NGO projects, as an excuse to get out of Pyongyang, such as hospitals, which are very poorly equipped. Vowles said he found himself surprisingly busy, after five months in Pyongyang, with evening events with other embassies, UN officials, or with visitors. There was no general meeting with Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency El Baradei in early March. Many diplomats take taekwondo lessons each week, appreciated as a rare chance to talk to North Koreans.

¶ 14. (C) Vowles said that he and colleagues believe that their value-added comes from their ability to move around a 30-kilometer-radius area, in and around Pyongyang, largely unimpeded, though probably followed or tracked by district wardens and visible police. They can also travel outside Pyongyang along major corridors, but have to ask for permission to go to Kaesong and other areas. He said that there were many restaurants and small stores scattered around Pyongyang, though there were no signs advertising them. Hence, UK officials drive or bicycle around Pyongyang, sometimes discovering establishments based on gatherings of people. At these off-the-beaten-path restaurants, some locals, often businessmen with signs of some wealth, are willing to talk to UK officers. Conversations are oblique, he said, with occasional references to the need for the DPRK to open up more, but that this depends on the people "up there" (pointing skyward, alluding to senior officials). South Korea is not discussed. Most propaganda is pro-regime, rather than anti-U.S., though there is some of the latter.

¶ 15. (C) UK officials sometimes see a fleet of VW Passats, which may carry senior DPRK officials. Vowles recently saw a Humvee being driven around Pyongyang. Only diplomats are allowed to drive around Pyongyang on Sunday. Diplomats have coupons they exchange for fuel. There are no public gas stations; instead, there are gated stations. At night, apartments and other buildings are illuminated by low-wattage light bulbs until about 10 p.m., after which the city is dark.

¶ 16. (C) Exploring Pyongyang, a UK official once saw South Korean DVDs for sale, but it is more common for DVDs to be sold under the table at small markets. Local staff can get them readily. UK officials are supposed to Exchange euros at the official exchange rate of 200 NK won/euro, but can sometimes get over ten times that amount at markets. There are large warehouse-style markets with many vendors near the UK Embassy, stocked with produce and goods from China that most North Koreans cannot afford. Other stores are nearly empty of goods and customers. Vowles said that the Embassy estimates that an average DPRK official spends all of his or her monthly salary on apartment rental and food, some of which is distributed through workplaces. Extra money, if any, comes from selling items in markets or spouses having other jobs. There are no bookstores, but books are sometimes available. Newspapers are delivered to certain offices but are not for sale. Many people walk long distances to work, because the subway's two lines serve only a limited area, and the electric trolleys often break down or lack power. Vowles was not aware of any crime. He said many soldiers could be seen around the city, but appearing to be on leave rather than in formation. He has seen no tanks driving on the streets, but has heard that there may be a major military parade on April 25. Vowles has often seen organized groups of people doing work projects or practicing for the Arirang cultural festival, the latter considered a morale booster.

EMBASSY MANAGEMENT

¶ 17. (C) Embassy management is a challenge, but morale is good. The UK pays salaries for its interpreters (about 300 euros/month) and other local employees (who are presumed to report to DPRK intelligence) to a DPRK general administration office, and it is not clear how much of that the employees receive. Employees are often eager to work overtime or on weekends because their housing is not heated, whereas the Embassy and officials' residences have reliable electricity and heat from a German-Embassy-operated generator. Local employees are not allowed inside the inner offices of the UK Embassy. Even so, the assumption is that all conversations are bugged, so officials sometimes communicate by passing notes. There are some classified communications with London. The Embassy has funds set aside for refurbishment, but

contractors have refused to come do the work because they refuse to fly on Air Koryo, the DPRK's only commercial carrier (Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday flights from Beijing). UK officers go to Beijing every five weeks, and occasionally visit Seoul. There are occasional private flights from China.

¶8. (C) Vowles said that the UK Embassy has no access to independent information about the food, health or human rights situation in the North, or the July 2006 flood, relying on NGO information and reports from other governments. Measles was a concern now, though the earlier rumors of large Scarlet Fever outbreaks had not been verified. There was no overt evidence of widespread hunger in Pyongyang.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) At the UK-hosted dinner featuring Vowles, other diplomats from the EU, UK, New Zealand and Germany had visited Pyongyang, and they reported similar frustrations at being on the ground but learning little about real conditions, instead spending hours visiting the shrine to Kim Il Sung or going to other mandatory attractions.

VERSHBOW